

From War to Paralympics, U.S. Vets Compete on Ice

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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SOCHI — Surging across the ice as chants of "Ro-ss-ia! Ro-ss-ia!" from raucous Russian fans filled the venue, Joshua Sweeney felt the rush of adrenaline he used to experience as a soldier.

Less than five years after stepping on an improvised explosive device while on patrol in Afghanistan, the retired U.S. Marine sergeant is serving his country again overseas — in the sporting arena.

The explosion that took away Sweeney's legs and left arm put the Texan on a new path — to the Paralympics and ice sledge hockey.

"It is all kind of the same — you are out there getting cheered against, getting guys battling, you are hitting, having fun," Sweeney said Tuesday after a surprise 2-1 U.S. loss to the Russians at the Sochi Winter Paralympics.

"You have to fight through the adversity to be the best team. Just like in the military they tell you stuff is going to happen and you have to fight through it."

It was an intense game Tuesday. More than 5,000 Russians roared on their team in the Shayba Arena, witnessing a sporting meeting of countries whose diplomatic tensions have moved back toward Cold War levels in recent weeks over the crisis in Ukraine.

The Americans, the reigning champions, lost for the first time since the 2006 Paralympics. Russia only formed its sledge hockey team in 2009. The U.S. and Russia could still meet in the final as they have both advanced to the semifinals.

The U.S. will play Canada in one semifinal, with Russia facing Norway in the other.

Sledge hockey, which debuted at the 1994 Winter Paralympics in Lillehammer, sees players with a lower-body physical impairment moving on double-blade sledges instead of skates.

"It kind of brings back that adrenaline rush from past times and it gives me a good release [from] things in life that happen," Sweeney said.

"Sled hockey has done so much for me in terms of teaching me a lot more about life after being injured, how to persevere through things you never thought would happen to you. It has been awesome and I do not know where I would be today if it was not for sled hockey or sport."

When he was wounded and awaiting medical assistance in Afghanistan in 2009, Sweeney feared for his life. He survived and soon discovered a route back into the sport he loved.

"Before I was injured I did not even know there was a Paralympics," said Sweeney, who played ice hockey in high school. "I knew that there were injured people who competed in sports but I did not know it was this big.

"So, after being injured and realizing what I could potentially be involved with, I was very excited."

Sweeney was not the only military veteran battling the Russians on ice. Rico Roman lost his left leg after his vehicle was struck by a roadside bomb during the last month of his third and final tour of Iraq in February 2007.

"I asked to serve and I asked to go into harm's way," the retired army staff sergeant said. "I have no regrets. Never. Unfortunately accidents happen, but that is what got me here today."

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